

52ND ANNUAL ARIZONA RURAL HEALTH CONFERENCE

# From Incarceration to Infrastructure

*Leveraging Lived Experience to Strengthen Rural Health Systems*

Shaun McClure | President NAMI Payson | Founder 4<sup>th</sup> Gear Project

# The Cost of Untapped Human Capital

"I was 15 the first time I was arrested.

A 19-year-old had been threatening me all day... When the system arrived — I never saw anyone. No counselor. No advocate. Nobody asked what happened before that moment.

*That fight wasn't the beginning of my story. It was a symptom of a story nobody bothered to read.*

***That's not a personal failure. That's a design flaw.***

— *And that design flaw is exactly what we're here to talk about today.*

# The Rural Reality

## Crisis at 2am

CIT unavailable.  
Law enforcement  
arrives instead.  
Not because it's right —  
because it's the only tool.

## No Redundancy

One provider leaves —  
no backup.  
One program ends —  
no alternative.  
Everybody knows everybody.

## Peer Support

Someone who sat in  
that same darkness.  
Who they might actually  
open the door for when  
they won't for a uniform.

*"The system isn't broken. It was never fully built."*

# The Blind Spot

*"We don't just exclude lived experience from leadership and planning.*

*We actively punish it when it shows up.*

*I watched a room full of addicts — people who had lived inside addiction — argue with a credentialed staff member about drug interactions. Not theoretically."*

## What Gets Excluded:

Firsthand knowledge of what crisis actually feels like

Credibility with people who won't open the door for anyone else

Hard-won insight that cannot be replicated in a classroom

The story that makes someone believe change is possible

# The Proof of Concept

*"I facilitate Creative Expression workshops — art-based programming for people navigating mental health challenges. I've had program directors come to me with tears in their eyes because a family member told them they hadn't seen their loved one smile in years. Then that person came to my class — and they smiled.*

*I didn't do that with a credential. I did it with a story they recognized as real."*

## Frontline Roles Where Lived Experience Belongs:

Recovery Coaches

Crisis Line Advocates

Community Health Workers

Re-entry Coordinators

Peer Support Specialists

Youth Mentors

Jail Diversion Specialists

Prevention Educators

CIT Co-Responders

# The Obstacles

## Credentialing Barriers

Licensing and certification requirements exclude people with criminal records — even when their experience is the most relevant qualification.

## Background Check Walls

Automatic disqualification policies eliminate candidates before an interview. The record becomes the whole story.

## Funding Gaps in Rural Systems

Peer support positions are underfunded and informal. They run on conviction because the system hasn't built pathways to sustain them.

## Institutional Distrust

Systems designed to process people struggle to empower them. The infrastructure wasn't built with the formerly incarcerated in mind.

*"The question is not whether they are capable. The question is whether your system is designed to let them in."*

# The Ask

- 01** Audit your hiring and credentialing pathways — identify where lived experience gets systematically excluded
- 02** Create formal peer support roles with real pay, real supervision, and real career ladders — not volunteer slots
- 03** Partner with re-entry programs and advocacy organizations to build pipelines into your workforce
- 04** Stop treating lived experience as a liability. Start treating it as a qualification

**The people best  
equipped to help  
build that system  
were never  
asked.**

***Today, I'm asking.***

## **Shaun McClure**

Certified Personal Trainer | Mental Performance Coach

---

4thgearfitness.com

shaun@4thgearfitness.com

(480) 420-8107

*"Train with Purpose. Move with Power."*